

UNEARTHING ETHNOCENTRISM IN MUSIC RESEARCH: Latin American Experiences with Ethnomusicology

by CAROLINA SANTAMARIA

S

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, STILL A NAIVE Latin American first-year student of ethnomusicology in a North American university, I became aware for the first time of my odd position as a scholar caught between two different cultures. I was part of a small

group of passionate graduate students who wanted to become field researchers and music ethnographers, and our professors led our debates on topics central to the discipline, such as how a scholar approaches a different society, how the researcher communicates with people who see the world in a different way, how one tries to understand other points of view and other ways to make music. But for reasons that I didn't understand very well then, I had the feeling that there was something in those discussions that touched a special chord in my own experience. For my classmates, those concerns with cultural difference seemed remote problems, the type of issue one would have to face only at some point in the future while doing fieldwork, in a situation far removed from the classroom setting. But I was actually experiencing those problems as an international student, trying to understand American culture and how an American university worked, as well as speaking and thinking in a language that was not my own. Five years later, when I returned to Bogotá to resume my job as a professor at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, I had a very similar feeling. It seemed I was again speaking in another language, I suspected my colleagues didn't quite understand my point of view, and I had trouble remembering the inner workings of my former alma mater. In the end, I wasn't quite sure what I would actually do in Colombia as a North American-trained ethnomusicologist.

Of course, anybody who has lived and studied in a different country for a long period of time has experienced the same kind of "culture shock." Most people think, however, that such bewilderment occurs only on a personal level: after a while, you just get used to everyday life again and that's the end of the problem. Although one eventually resolves that kind of cultural anxiety, it does have another problematic side that is usually overlooked. The cultural shock also has an epistemological aspect: is knowledge culturally neutral and, therefore, universal? To

put it in other words, is whatever one has learned in one place applicable, understandable, and pertinent in another place? Living in this age of globalization, we like to think that knowledge and ideas, like commodities, can be produced, distributed, and used everywhere. But there are some kinds of knowledge that might be essential if you live in a tropical forest—for example, how to make fire with two sticks—but virtually useless if you live in downtown New York. So, did my training as a music researcher in a North American university prepare me to confront the problems I would have to face working in Latin America? When I went back to Colombia, I had to face the fact that ethnomusicology is not an institutionalized discipline in Colombian universities, and, consequently, few people knew or even cared about the kind of research I usually do with popular and traditional music. Certainly, even though the term ethnomusicology is almost unknown, it doesn't mean that no one studies or writes about traditional and popular music. Quite the contrary; Colombian musical expressions are so abundant and so rich that numerous researchers have studied and written extensively about them, although most of them were never trained as ethnomusicologists and only a few worked within academic institutions.

The absence of institutionalization in the field of ethnomusicology in the majority of Latin American universities raises very uncomfortable questions: is my own work—or the work of any ethnomusicologist trained in North American or European universities—intrinsically better than the work done by an untrained Latin American researcher who works outside the academic system? A comparison between studies carried out by scholars in the north and in the south probably would render several differences in such aspects as methodologies used, orientations and politics that inspire the research, and access to and use of resources. Most likely, the style of research and its result each would be very different, but I think there is nothing inherently better or worse in the way North American or Latin American music researchers pursue their studies. But then, why do most Latin American students who want to pursue an academic career as music researchers still have to go abroad to get their degrees? In terms of power, what does it mean to come back to the south with an academic degree granted in the north? Is an

inexperienced Ph.D. in ethnomusicology more knowledgeable about the music of a certain ethnic group than an untrained researcher who has worked with that ethnic group for years? If the answer is no—as it should be—why does a prospective Latin American student of ethnomusicology have to attend the outside school and get a degree? Why don't we just go to the field and learn how to do research from the process of doing it?

The course I was invited to teach at LLILAS in fall 2008 aimed to present these kinds of thorny questions for students of musicology and ethnomusicology, especially for those with a Latin American background. In most ethnomusicology programs offered in the United States, professors and students are extremely conscious of the complexities of cultural difference involved in the relationship between the researcher and his or her informants. However, the discipline has paid little attention to the incidence of cultural difference in the horizontal relationship between scholars in the metropolis—the so-called First World—and scholars on the periphery. Only recently have members of the Society of Ethnomusicology (SEM) begun to actively recognize the existence and significance of analogous disciplinary associations outside the English-speaking world. In spite of it, I think the problem cannot be reduced to an issue of power inequalities between scholars working in different places and different languages. The main point is that the production of knowledge about music is not culturally blind: the kinds of questions you ask and the uses to which you want to put that knowledge are closely tied to your own cultural and institutional standpoint. In consequence, some research questions might be considered smart and pertinent from one point of view, but very silly from another. Moreover, the final products of research are not always the same: if you have an academic career in a university, you want to produce books and articles, but if you work in a Ministry of Culture in Latin America, you want to produce public policies.

How conscious are the students of musicology and ethnomusicology about the impact of cultural difference in the production of knowledge about music? I had the good fortune to work at LLILAS with a small group of talented students from different backgrounds, most of them from Latin American countries; therefore, we were all scholars in-between two cultures. Not surprisingly, most of them had felt the

same kind of cultural shock I had once experienced as an international student, and that was the point of departure for our discussion. We began to elaborate on the point of view of the “native scholar” and debate the existence of a “local knowledge,” using ideas from Latin American postcolonial thinkers such as Walter Dignolo, Enrique Dussel, and Santiago Castro-Gómez. In addition, I tried to illustrate different options to present the outcome of music research using examples from Colombia, such as CDs produced by NGOs or independent musicians, public education programs on traditional music, and Web pages created by the Ministry of Culture. At first, the students looked at these examples with some skepticism. They tried to find evidence of scientific rigor and methodological accuracy presented in the same way they appear in the work of metropolitan ethnomusicologists. But in the end, we found that in many cases those initial misgivings were groundless. The main goal of that exercise was to think critically about local ways to produce ethnomusicological knowledge, by looking at the researcher's cultural and institutional standpoint, the purpose of the study and its possible social function, and the applied value of that knowledge—for example, in the conception of music education programs for schools in small rural towns.

I am very pleased with the outcome of that experience, although I think it was just a small step on a very long journey. Scholars in other disciplines, especially in anthropology, have been very critical of the burden of their discipline's colonial heritage, but musicologists and ethnomusicologists still have a long way to go in the deconstruction of our ethnocentric disciplinary paradigms and canons. But I am optimistic about the future of Latin American musicology—as a unitary discipline, without the limiting prefix “ethno”—because of the rising number of graduate students and young professors in the north and the south who are focused on Latin American music. In 2009, for the first time since it was founded in the 1950s, the annual conference of SEM will meet outside the United States; it is highly significant that Mexico City is the location chosen for that effort to decentralize the discipline.

Carolina Santamaria was the Tinker Visiting Professor at LLILAS during fall 2008. She is Professor of Musicology at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia. ☀

TERESA LOZANO LONG ENDOWED PROFESSORSHIPS

The Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies endowment established three professorships in areas of discipline in Latin American studies to recognize excellence in both teaching and research in the field. Kurt Weyland with the Department of Government was honored with the first professorship as the Lozano Long Professor in Latin American Politics. His research interests focus on democratization, market reform, social policy and policy diffusion, and populism in Latin America. In his research, Dr. Weyland draws on a range of theoretical and methodological approaches, including insights from cognitive psychology.

Javier Auyero with the Department of Sociology was awarded the Lozano Long Professorship in Latin American Sociology. He is a distinguished sociological theorist and methodologist with substantial contributions to the understanding of political and social change in contemporary Latin America. His research concentrates on politics, community organization, and social movements in Argentina.

Ivan Teixeira with the Department of Spanish and Portuguese holds the Lozano Long Professorship in Latin American Literature. He is one of Latin America's major literary critics, specializing in Brazilian literature with expertise in both Portuguese and Brazilian literature from the colonial period to the twentieth century. Dr. Teixeira's publications include a widely acclaimed study of art and culture during the government of the Marquis of Pombal. (See related story on p. 50.)